

Group helps preteens focus on healthy habits

'Girls in Motion' aims to build self-esteem, prevent eating disorders

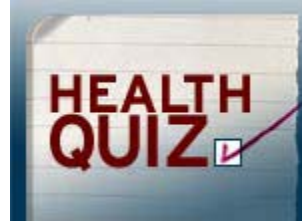
AP Associated Press

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DALLAS - Walking briskly along a tree-lined

university avenue, a group of fourth- and fifth-grade girls have a lively conversation about food while exercising with their college-age mentors.

"What did y'all eat for breakfast?" asks Elizabeth Chappell, a 20-year-old Southern Methodist University student. "Cheese toast," shouts one girl. "Waffle sticks," comes another reply.



• [Do you have an eating disorder?](#)

"What should you eat more of?" Chappell asks. "Fruits — and veggies," comes the response. Reinforcing good eating habits is one of the key tenets of "Girls in Motion," a program started last year at SMU to promote a healthy body image and prevent eating disorders before girls become teens.

The program was inspired by Elisa Ruth McCall, a 20-year-old Dallas college student who killed herself in 1996 after struggling with an eating disorder. Her parents established an endowment fund at SMU in her name, along with the nonprofit Elisa Project. Both pay for the program. Elisa's father Rick McCall said he believes his daughter started on the path to bulimia around the age of 10½ to 11. He said he thinks the Girls in Motion program is a promising way to help girls stay on a healthy course.

"My expectation is it'll help build self-esteem and an understanding of who they are," McCall said. The free six-week program involves workshops on fitness,

healthy eating and body image. The girls learn lessons ranging from how to make healthy afternoon snacks to how genetics play a role in body type. The spring class had 14 girls — ages 9 to 11 — from six Dallas-area schools. Their parents signed them up after seeing fliers advertising the program. Mandy Golman, a wellness instructor at SMU, and Cathey Soutter, coordinator of psychological services for women at SMU, run Girls in Motion. Golman said she got the idea of pairing younger and older girls after seeing her 8-year-old daughter interact with college students. “Whatever they say goes,” she said. “She just idolized them.”

Early start

Soutter said teaching girls healthy habits and an acceptance of their body types before they become teenagers can make a difference. “We feel like by the time girls are 12 and 13 and 14, they are in the throes of puberty,” Soutter said. “You hit girls earlier when they are far more resilient.” The 12 college volunteers this spring led the lessons more like big sisters than authoritative adults. Chappell, a marketing major who said she enjoys working with kids, was surprised at some of the things the girls confided in her.

“They were telling me that all the popular girls, they don’t eat food. They eat like a bite of lettuce,” Chappell said. Jeannie Caldwell, mother of 10-year-old Anna Jones, said her daughter is more conscientious about nutrition now and getting used to exercising more. Susan Baresh of Dallas said she appreciates the reinforcement on healthy eating that her 10-year-old, Blythe, gets from the program. Blythe said she liked having an older girl to talk to, and the program made her more aware of good nutrition.

“I try to eat a little bit of fruit once a day and not too much sugar,” she said. “If I think I’ve had enough, I just tell myself, ‘You’ve had enough.’”

Golman said results are still preliminary from the inaugural fall session. She hopes to do follow-up studies to see if the new healthy habits stick.

Dr. Kevin Wandler, vice president of medical services at Remuda Ranch Treatment Centers for Anorexia and Bulimia Inc. in Wickenburg, Ariz., said programs like Girls in Motion seem to be rare but necessary. "Starting young is good," said Wandler, whose program has treated children as young as 9 for eating disorders. "Kids start 'dieting' at this age group, and it's scary."

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